

Natural Liberation

Padmasambhava's Teachings on the Six Bardos



Commentary by Gyatrul Rinpoche

Translated by B. Alan Wallace

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Translator's Preface

THIS BOOK CONTAINS A TRANSLATION and commentary on the great Indian Buddhist tantric master Padmasambhava's text, entitled *The Profound Dharma of the Natural Liberation through Contemplating the Peaceful and Wrathful: Stage of Completion Instructions on the Six Bardos*.¹ Presumably composed some time in the late eighth century, the text was dictated by Padmasambhava to his Tibetan consort, Yeshe Tsogyal. Tibetan tradition views Padmasambhava as an emanation of Amitābha, the Buddha of Infinite Light, and refers to him as Guru Rinpoche, or Precious Spiritual Mentor. His name, Padmasambhava, means "born from a lotus," indicating his miraculous birth from a lotus in the midst of a lake in the region of Oḍḍiyāṇa. Adopted by the king of Oḍḍiyāṇa, Padmasambhava dedicated his life to the study and practice of esoteric, or Vajrayāna, Buddhism.

In the eighth century, the Tibetan king Trisong Detsen invited Padmasambhava to Tibet to assist the Indian abbot Śāntarakṣita in building the first enduring monastery in that land. In Tibet, Padmasambhava devoted himself to subduing the many malevolent forces that were obstructing the study and practice of Buddhism there, and he gave numerous teachings to his disciples, among whom twenty-five became renowned, accomplished adepts in their own right. When his work in Tibet was completed, tradition says, Padmasambhava departed to the west in a body of pure light to the buddha-field known as the Glorious Copper-colored Mountain, where he resides even to this day.²

Padmasambhava concealed many of his teachings in the manner of "spiritual time-capsules" known as "treasures" (*gter ma*; pronounced *terma*) to be gradually revealed over the centuries when

human civilization was ready to receive them. The delayed revelation of these teachings parallels the manner in which the Mahāyāna doctrine came to be eventually revealed to the general public several centuries after the passing of the historical Buddha, and the way in which many Buddhist tantras came to be revealed for the first time in India in the centuries following that. Some of Padmasambhava's hidden teachings—known as earth treasures (*sa gter*)—were written down and concealed underground, in caves, or even inside large boulders. Other teachings—known as mind treasures (*dgongs gter*)—were mystically secreted in the mind-streams of his own disciples, awaiting their conscious discovery in the disciples' subsequent lifetimes. During the centuries following his departure to the Glorious Copper-colored Mountain, numerous “treasure revealers” (*gter ston*; pronounced *tertön*), who have generally been regarded as emanations either of Padmasambhava or of his chief disciples, have discovered great numbers of these treasures and have subsequently propagated these teachings.³

The concluding words “Samaya. Sealed, sealed, sealed” at the end of sections of this text are unique to hidden treasure texts, or *terma*. The word *samaya* in this context indicates that those who handle this text should remember their samayas, or tantric pledges. The words “sealed, sealed, sealed” are a warning that if someone other than the treasure revealer should accidentally come across these texts while they are still concealed, they should leave the texts alone. These words also warn the treasure revealer who was intended to discover the texts that he or she should make them known only at the appropriate time. Finally, those who read these texts are warned with these words not to show the texts to those who have no faith or to those whose samayas have degenerated.

One of the most renowned treasure revealers in Tibet was Karma Lingpa, who lived in the fourteenth century and is regarded as an emanation of Padmasambhava himself. It was he who discovered the present treatise—a classic example of an earth treasure—in a cave on Gampo Dar Mountain in central Tibet. Dealing with the six transitional processes, or *bardos*, this text quickly became an important treatise of the Nyingma order of

Tibetan Buddhism; as such, it has been widely taught and practiced by Tibetans ever since, but only by those fully initiated into this cycle of Vajrayāna Buddhist teachings. This treatise may also be considered as a companion volume to the well-known *Tibetan Book of the Dead*,⁴ for both are included within the same cycle of treasures discovered by Karma Lingpa. *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* chiefly concerns the dying process and the subsequent intermediate state, or bardo,⁵ prior to one's next rebirth, and in Tibet it was commonly recited during and after an individual's death to aid that person in making the transition to the next life. The present work is much more extensive in its scope, providing practical meditation instructions pertaining to all six transitional processes, or bardos, namely those of living, dreaming, meditating, dying, the intermediate state following death, and rebirth.

This treasure text was made available to a broader public in the West when, during the early months of 1995, the Venerable Gyatrul Rinpoche, a senior lama of the Payul lineage of the Nyingma order, taught it openly to a group comprising both Buddhists and non-Buddhists at the Orgyen Dorje Den Buddhist center in San Francisco, California. Born in the Gyalrong region of eastern Tibet in 1925, Gyatrul Rinpoche was recognized at a young age by Jamyang Khyentse Lodrö Thaye as the incarnation of Sampa Künkyap, a Payul lineage meditator who spent his life in retreat and who later gave empowerments and transmissions from his retreat cave to multitudes of disciples. After being brought to Payul Domang Monastery, home of his previous incarnation, the young Gyatrul was educated by his tutor, Sangye Gön. During his extensive spiritual training, he received personal instruction on many Buddhist treatises, including the present one, by numerous renowned masters of the Nyingma order, including Tulku Natsok Rangdröl, Payul Chogtrul Rinpoche, Apkong Khenpo, and His Holiness Dudjom Rinpoche. In Tibet he received the oral transmission and instructions on the present treatise from the eminent Lama Norbu Tenzin.

After fleeing from Tibet into exile in India in 1959, Gyatrul Rinpoche continued his spiritual training and served the Tibetan

community in India in various ways until 1972, when His Holiness the Dalai Lama sent him to Canada to offer spiritual guidance to Tibetans who had settled there. Since then, he has taught widely throughout North America, establishing numerous Buddhist centers in Oregon, California, New Mexico, and Mexico. He presently moves back and forth between his principle center, Tashi Choeling, near Ashland, Oregon, and his home in Half Moon Bay, California.

When Gyatrul Rinpoche taught this text in 1995, he invited all those with faith in these teachings—whether or not they had tantric initiation or were even Buddhist—to listen to them and to put them into practice. Among the assembled students were several who were suffering from critical illnesses, including AIDS, which made the teachings on the dying process all the more poignant to those listening. He also invites all those who read this book with faith to engage in the practices described here for the benefit of themselves and all sentient beings.

In addition to the main text by Padmasambhava, together with the transcribed, edited, oral commentary given by Gyatrul Rinpoche in 1995, this work also includes translations of other, shorter works that are closely associated with the treatise on the six transitional processes. To facilitate the reader's use of these works, they have been arranged in this book in three separate parts. Part 1 describes the preliminary practices considered to be necessary for engaging in the practices described in the main text. Part 2 consists of the main text itself. And Part 3 contains a number of supplementary prayers. All three parts also contain a transcription of Gyatrul Rinpoche's oral teachings.

The introduction, which takes up the topic of motivation, contains the initial advice and remarks given by Gyatrul Rinpoche before the start of the 1995 teachings. In chapter 1, Gyatrul Rinpoche comments on a text entitled *Preliminary Practices for Subduing Your Own Mind-stream: An Appendix to the Natural Emergence of the Peaceful and the Wrathful from Enlightened Awareness: Experiential Instructions on the Transitional Process*.⁶ This text was composed by Chöje Lingpa,

Karma Lingpa's principle disciple, and was written down by Guru Nyida Özer. Although Tibetan tradition includes this work as an appendix to the present cycle of teachings, Gyatrul Rinpoche chose to present it first for the benefit of those who are newcomers to Vajrayāna Buddhist practice. The text entails discursive meditations for subduing one's own mind-stream as a necessary prerequisite to engaging in the practices pertaining to the six transitional processes. These discursive meditations concern the suffering of the cycle of existence, the difficulty of obtaining a human life of leisure and endowment, and death and impermanence. The practices of *guru yoga*, the purificatory hundred-syllable mantra of Vajrasattva, and the *maṇḍala* offering are also included in this work by Chöje Lingpa, but they are not translated here, for these practices are included in the following section.

Chapter 2 contains another related text called *The Natural Liberation of the Mind-itself: The Four-Session Yoga of Spiritual Activity of the Secret Mantra Vajrayāna*,⁷ composed by Chöje Lingpa and written down by Guru Sūryacandra. Like the preceding work, tradition now includes it in this same cycle of teachings concerning the transitional processes. The first of the four sessions discussed here entails meditations on going for outer, inner, and secret refuge, generating the Mahāyāna spirit of awakening, and cultivating the four immeasurables. The second session is a meditation involving the recitation of the one-hundred syllable mantra of Vajrasattva. In the third session one makes the ritual offering of the maṇḍala, and the fourth session includes a prayer to the lineage of spiritual mentors and a meditation on receiving the four empowerments. If one is engaging in a meditative retreat on the six transitional processes, all the above practices may be performed on a daily basis, together with the practices taught in the main work. If one is incorporating these prayers and meditations in one's daily practice while living an active way of life in the world, these additional recitations may be done intermittently as one wishes.

After these two preliminary chapters comes Part 2 of the book, which presents the main text, *The Profound Dharma of the Natural Liberation through Contemplating the Peaceful and*

Wrathful: Stage of Completion Instructions on the Six Bardos, along with Gyatrul Rinpoche's commentary. Each of the main text's six chapters is presented separately, in chapters 3 through 8 of the present volume. Each of these six chapters takes up one of the six transitional processes, or bardos, starting with the transitional process of living and progressing through the transitional processes of dreaming, meditation, dying, reality-itself, and becoming. Each chapter also describes a different aspect of natural liberation, such as, for example, the natural liberation of confusion, which occurs during the transitional process of dreaming; and the natural liberation of seeing, which occurs during the transitional process of reality-itself. In each chapter, the text gives detailed instructions for practices that are designed to help the practitioner transform each transitional process into a profound opportunity for liberation and enlightenment.

Part 3 of this book contains a number of supplementary prayers, all of which are considered to be part of the cycle of treasures that accompanies the main text. Chapter 9, entitled "Three Prayers Concerning the Transitional Processes,"⁸ consists of three prayers. The first is a prayer for recalling the practical instructions of one's spiritual mentor. The second prayer is entitled "The Natural Liberation of All Attainments: A Prayer Concerning the Transitional Process."⁹ This prayer itself has two parts: "The Prayer for Liberation through the Narrow Passage of the Transitional Process,"¹⁰ which entails supplications to the five buddhas and their consorts for blessings to transmute the five mental poisons into the five types of primordial wisdom; and "The Prayer for Protection from Fear in the Transitional Process,"¹¹ which is specifically aimed at transforming the transitional processes of dying so that it becomes an avenue to spiritual awakening. The third prayer in this section is "The Prayer of Calling for Help to the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas,"¹² which calls for the blessings of the buddhas and bodhisattvas when one is at death's door. Padmasambhava is the author of these prayers as well, and they, too, are among the treasures revealed by Karma Linpga.

In chapter 10, the reader will find a prayer of supplication entitled, "The Natural Liberation of the Vast Expanse of the Three Embodiments,"¹³ in which one requests the various manifestations of the Buddha for blessings for one's spiritual development along the path. Chapter 11 contains a prayer entitled, "The Natural Liberation of the Three Poisons Without Rejecting Them: A Guru Yoga Prayer to the Three Embodiments."¹⁴ This text is intended to help the practitioner to transmute the three mental poisons into the three embodiments of the Buddha. Both of these prayers are included in the same cycle of teachings as our main text, so their author is Padmasambhava, and they were revealed by Karma Lingpa.

The translation of the root text was prepared in the following way: first Gyatrul Rinpoche went over all these texts with me, line by line, to help me translate them into English. Then he provided an oral commentary to these treatises at Orgyen Dorje Den, reading from the original Tibetan, while I orally translated his commentary and read from the first draft of my English translation. This second reading and commentary enabled me to polish my original translation. Kay Henry, a devoted student of Gyatrul Rinpoche, then volunteered to take on the prodigious task of transcribing the entire oral commentary and coupling this with the textual translations. Then it fell to me to edit the oral commentary, and—together with John Dunne and Sara McClintock, our editors at Wisdom Publications—to prepare the entire work in its present form. I wish to express my deep thanks to Gyatrul Rinpoche for guiding me in the translation of these texts and for his clear and accessible commentary and to Kay Henry, John Dunne, and Sara McClintock, without whom this work could not have been brought to completion. May our efforts be of benefit!

*B. Alan Wallace
Santa Barbara, California
Spring 1997*

PART ONE

INTRODUCTION

AND

PRELIMINARIES

Introduction: Motivation

IT SEEMS THAT MOST OF YOU have set your minds on attaining buddhahood and you're thinking, "I'm going to become a buddha." But, what's that about? Why would you want to become a buddha? Are you inspired by a patriotic motivation? Do you want to do something for your country? Or is it something for yourself? If it's for yourself, in what way would becoming a buddha be of benefit to you? We want to become buddhas because we are wandering in this cycle of existence, within *saṃsāra*. But what is *saṃsāra*? A lot of people say, "Oh, it's such a drag to live in San Francisco." Or people say, "Yeah, well, it's even worse in Los Angeles." And other people say, "Well, it's even worse in New York." Is this what "wandering in *saṃsāra*" is about, going from one city to another? No, that's not the point.

Saṃsāra, this cycle of existence, refers to the six types of sentient existence from the hell realms through the *deva*, or celestial, realms. As we are wandering within these realms, we are subject to the six types of existence, each of which has its own specific type of suffering. In attaining buddhahood, or perfect enlightenment, we gain release from all of these realms. In terms of the temporal well-being to be gained, we achieve the existence of humans or of gods. In terms of the ultimate or everlasting well-being, this is the attainment of enlightenment itself. By achieving that, we gain genuine freedom. Ask yourself, "Do I have that freedom right now?" I don't have it, and I expect that you don't have it either. In order to attain genuine freedom, we strive for enlightenment.

The following is an extensive teaching on each of the six transitional processes, or *bardos*, that make up our experience in *saṃsāra*. This teaching is based on the primary text by Padmasambhava called *The Profound Dharma of the Natural Liberation through Contemplating the Peaceful and Wrathful*. The

term *natural liberation* can also be translated as *self-liberation*; it is something that occurs automatically, spontaneously, or naturally. In this profound text, Padmasambhava teaches us how to attain this kind of natural liberation within the six transitional processes that make up *samsāra* itself.

Before we can apply these practices, however, it is necessary for us to recognize the suffering of *samsāra*. Each realm of sentient existence has its own specific types of suffering that need to be recognized. The suffering of the *deva*, or celestial, realm is the anguish that occurs in anticipation of death. For, as death draws nigh, the *devas* are subject to great misery because they can see where their next, lower rebirth will be. The suffering of the *asuras*, or the demigods, is one of conflict and aggression. With human beings, the suffering to which we are specifically subject is the suffering of birth, aging, sickness, and death. For animals, there is the suffering of foolishness and stupidity. For *pretas*, or spirits, there is the suffering of thirst and hunger. Finally, for the denizens of the hell realms, there is the suffering of extreme heat and extreme cold. Within the context of recognizing these various types of suffering in the cycle of existence, we must also recognize that we have now achieved a human life of leisure and endowment. On the one hand, this means that we now have a human body. But it also includes the fact that we have already encountered one or more spiritual mentors of the Mahāyāna tradition that can lead us to the attainment of enlightenment; and we have obtained Dharma teachings that lay out for us the path to achieve enlightenment in this very lifetime.

Upon recognizing the difficulty of achieving a human life of leisure and endowment and recognizing as well the great significance of such a human life, we then need to pursue this contemplation in terms of recognizing the shortness of this precious human rebirth with which we are presently endowed. When speaking of the types of suffering of the six realms of existence to which we are subject, we can ask, “How does it happen that we experience such suffering whether in a human life or in other lifetimes, in the hell realms, and so forth? Why should we have to suffer in

this way? Are we being punished by someone? Is it similar to the brutality of the Communist Chinese regime against the Tibetans? Is it like that? Or is it like the United States government in terms of its brutality against the Native Americans? Is it like that? Are we being punished in the same way as the Tibetans and the Native Americans were being punished?” The answer is, “No, not at all.”

How is it that we suffer? We suffer through our engagement in nonvirtuous actions. Suffering is the natural result of nonvirtuous actions. In terms of the relationships between actions and their effects called the law of karma, the result of nonvirtue is suffering and the result of virtue is joy. So it is we ourselves who are punishing ourselves. We ourselves are inflicting the retribution for our acts. We are experiencing the natural consequences of our own acts. There is no external agent who is punishing or rewarding us for them. What do all of you think?

Regarding the situation between the Tibetans and the Communist Chinese regime, had the Tibetans in their previous lives not committed certain unwholesome deeds, then they would not have had to experience the suffering that was inflicted upon them by the Chinese government. Without nonvirtue, there would not have been the ensuing suffering. Similarly, for the Native Americans, when these white, illegal immigrants came over from England, France, and so forth, and took over and perpetrated all the atrocities on the Native Americans here, had those Native Americans not committed unwholesome actions in their previous lives, they too would not have experienced the suffering that was inflicted upon them by these immigrants from Europe. If you believe in karma, then this is the situation. If you don't believe in karma, then anything goes.

In terms of the relationship between actions and their consequences, nothing is ever wasted. No action—be it wholesome or unwholesome, virtuous or nonvirtuous—is without its own consequences. It's very easy to think in our present situation that we can get away with lots of things and that our nonvirtuous actions are insignificant because we won't have to experience their consequences. In fact, this is an error. For example, had the

Native Americans not inflicted injury on other sentient beings in previous lifetimes, then they would not have experienced that suffering themselves. The same thing goes for the Tibetans. The whole cycle perpetuates itself. As white Europeans came over and inflicted great suffering upon the Native Americans, they committed great nonvirtuous actions for which they will experience the consequences in future lives, maybe even right now. In this way the cycle of existence is perpetuated, and it's for this reason that Guru Rinpoche said, "Although my view is as vast as space, when it comes to the nature of actions and their consequences, I am extremely precise, like little particles of flour." If we fail to do likewise, then we're not Buddhists; or at the very least, it's difficult for us to be Buddhists and at the same time to be unconscientious about our behavior.

I have been requested to give these teachings. It is very good to request such teachings, and it's very good for you to put such teachings into practice. It's very good for you to become knowledgeable with regard to these various theories and practices, but you should also know what the purpose of all of this is. What is the purpose of the knowledge? What is the purpose of the practice? If what you actually implement in your life is the eight mundane concerns, then, in fact, you will not be on a path that leads to wisdom.¹⁵ It will not lead to true erudition or to becoming a practitioner. In fact, if you are simply practicing the eight mundane concerns, then you are no different from politicians in America and around the world. They, too, have learned a lot. They are very smart, they're very knowledgeable, and they practice a lot; but what they're practicing is the eight mundane concerns, and you become indistinguishable from them. In learning about and practicing the eight mundane concerns, there is no benefit for your future lives. In comparison, the purpose of the sublime Buddhadharmā is that it is of benefit in this and future lives. In terms of whether our Dharma practice is adulterated by or identical with the practice of the eight mundane concerns, we must really look inside ourselves. We must know ourselves and gain this knowledge through introspection. In terms of our hearing,

thinking, and meditation, we must check up to ascertain the purity of our own practice. It is useless to point our fingers at other people and say, “Oh, look how that person is going astray and this person is getting involved in the eight mundane concerns.” There is no point in this, and, of course, the response we get from these other people when we do it is, “Give me a break” or “Mind your own business.” To learn this, we learn about ourselves. Leave other people alone.

Among Tibetan practitioners of Buddhism or among Buddhists around the world, there are many who, in fact, are very much involved in the eight mundane concerns. Insofar as our spiritual practice is adulterated by the eight mundane concerns, then this is like pouring poison into the Middle Way. By allowing our own spiritual practice to be so adulterated and poisoned, the knowledge we acquire of Dharma becomes wasted; and the great effort that we apply in the practice of Dharma also becomes wasted. For this reason, please consider this carefully. Please inspect your own understanding and your own practice to see that it is free of these eight mundane concerns.

MOTIVATION

Whatever type of practice we engage in—be it hearing, thinking or meditation—we need the proper motivation. What kind of motivation? If we review our lives from a very early age, from infancy to the present, and review our actions of body, speech, and mind, we can ask ourselves, “What value did those actions have? In what way were they of any benefit?” They may have had no benefit, or they may have had some mundane benefit. But while producing this small portion of mundane benefit, what these actions were really doing was simply perpetuating our wandering in the cycle of existence. However, in terms of acting as causes for our accomplishing the two embodiments¹⁶ of the Buddha—the Rūpakāya for the sake of others and the Dharmakāya for one’s own sake—it seems very likely that these activities until now have done nothing.

Why is this significant? The significance is that all of us die. Whether we want to die or not, this is our destiny; and over this we have no control. We cannot control how we will die. I guarantee completely that I don't have such control. I will not have control at my death, and I suspect it's unlikely that you will have control. On what grounds do I draw this conclusion? Look at our daily lives. To what extent do we have any control over the three poisons of attachment, hatred, and delusion? Don't these poisons dominate our actions from day to day? Even if we have some control over our minds and activities during the daytime, what control do we have at night in the dream-state? Do we have any control at all? If we don't have control in the day or night, on what grounds could we possibly imagine that we will have some control when this life is over and we're wandering in the intermediate state? This is true for all of us. We're equally without control. We don't have any kind of autonomy over our lives, and there are many illustrations of this that we can see around us in human society. For example, people get hooked on cigarette smoking even though they know that it leads to lung cancer as well as various other types of disorders. Their friends and relatives may plead with them, "Please stop, we want you to live a long time," and they may even want to stop; yet they have no control. In a similar fashion, we can become obsessed with alcohol, and then people say, "Oh, please, stop the drinking. It's so harmful." One wants to stop perhaps, but the will power is not there. The control is not there.

Moving closer to Dharma, we find that many people say, "Oh, I'm going to practice Dharma." However, when it gets right down to it, we don't practice Dharma. We just talk about getting to it when future circumstances are more felicitous; but in the meantime, we're awfully busy. I'm not just pointing the finger at you; I feel I'm in the same situation myself. In addition to this, I have students who I heard twenty or more years ago saying, "Well, the first thing is I'm going to get my financial situation secure. I'm going to make money, and then I can do other things." The decades have gone by, and I'm looking at these people. By and

large, they are in the same financial situation that they were in then. They haven't gotten the financial security they were looking for. What they have done in the meantime is accumulate a lot of nonvirtue.

These topics are worth our careful consideration. We should hear them and think about them. While knowing this and having gained some understanding of the distinction between virtue and nonvirtue, if you engage in nonvirtue—knowing that it will be detrimental to yourself and others—this is like recognizing that you have a glass of poison and drinking it anyway. The situation is exactly like that. That is, from moment to moment as we engage in activities that are dominated by the three poisons or the five poisons,¹⁷ then these actions lead to the perpetuation of our own cycle of existence.

The great spiritual mentors of the past are gone. Impermanence has taken its toll and they have passed away. Similarly, kings, the rich and the poor, the beautiful and the ugly, all perish. All of them are subject to this reality of impermanence and death. Given this reality of human existence, who can guarantee that we will not have to face death? Who can guarantee to save us from the consequences of our own actions? Who can guarantee to save us from the reality of impermanence? There isn't anyone who can give these guarantees, not among humans or gods.

For these reasons, there is the need for genuine Dharma practice, and the time for that is now. There's no putting it off. There can be no excuses. If we succumb to procrastination, we're the ones who lose out. It's not our spiritual mentor. It's not Buddhism. It's not the Dharma center. It's not anything else. We are the losers if we procrastinate in that way. By the way, it's important to recognize that the way of listening to the Dharma is different from the way of attending to other types of teachings. For example, in high school or college, a different mode is required. What is appropriate for these other, secular contexts is not appropriate here. In the context of requesting and listening to Dharma, it is important that you slow down your mind. Let your mind come to rest and attend to the teachings with mindfulness, with introspection.

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